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Light in the Darkness: An Analysis of the Design and Creation of MAIDS

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Bard

Light in the Darkness: An Analysis of the Design and Creation of *MAIDS*

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Arts
of Bard College

by Anna Drew Garrett-Larsen

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2017

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Izz and Emma. We did the thing. And we didn't kill each other. xo

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THE CAST:

Paris Adorno, Elise Alexander, Eleanor Bennett, Francesca Chorengel, Macey Downs, Anna Falvey, Phoebe Hiltermann, Francesca Keller, Piper de Palma, Violet Savage, Payton Smith, Brooke Tyborowski

I love you all dearly and your hard work, dedication, trust, and enthusiasm meant, and still means, the world. My heart is full to the brim, thanks to you.

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The Beginning

Isabel, Emma, and I were absolutely not going to work on Senior Project together... oops. I think that we all had an inkling it was going to happen no matter how many times we denied it. As members of our class started to pair off to work in the festival, the three of us talked about what concepts and ideas we were interested in. Our interests aligned, alarmingly so. One day, Isabel checked *The Penelopiad* out of the library. Emma saw it and started talking about how much she loved it. They told me I had to read it. The first line of the book reads, “*Now that I’m dead, I know everything.*”¹ I was sold. Barely a week later, we were a Senior Project trio using Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* as source material. It perfectly encapsulated what we had looked for in source material – an old story, a myth, centered on women, with the added bonus of the genius of Margaret Atwood. Atwood’s text examines feminism, class, and the intersection thereof by telling the story of Penelope and her twelve maids. Atwood deconstructs gender and the famous myth by giving voice to the female characters which are otherwise trapped in the pages of Homer’s *Odyssey*, confined to their traditional gender roles and, for the most part, erased from history. This was our opportunity to give voices to female actors, tell the story of a group of women on the LUMA stage, reclaim the voices of erased female characters, and shed light on the characters masked by the dark shadow of Odysseus’ patriarchal presence. Having spent four years watching men dominate the LUMA stage, I was excited and ready to infiltrate with an army of 15 proud, strong, determined women. Our original plan was to adapt her book into a play, though our end result was an original script inspired by *The Penelopiad*. We were prepared, we had a plan, and we were ready to go.

¹ Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, 1

Our Roles

From the beginning, we knew that the allocation of roles would be harder with three people than with two, particularly since we were uninterested in devising. The roles I had seen in the Senior Project Festival before include: actor, playwright, director, deviser/creator, translator, and dramaturge. I knew I wanted to be the designer, but since there is an official lighting designer for the festival, I was unsure whether our proposal would be approved with me listed as the designer. Thankfully, the Theater & Performance faculty trusted me enough to approve this choice. The initial roles we proposed were: Isabel as playwright, Emma as dramaturge, Annie as designer. We planned to co-direct the entire play. It became apparent almost immediately that co-directing was a terrible idea. We considered splitting up direction by section of the play or by groups of characters, but ultimately decided that it made the most sense for Emma to take on direction and have dramaturgy become part of my job as the designer. These are the roles we stuck with. I wouldn't call myself a dramaturge for the play, as that was not the main part of my role during rehearsal. It was more of an add-on to design, which was my primary responsibility. That being said, the dramaturgy work I did certainly influenced, birthed, and refined the design I created, and I am grateful that dramaturgy fell into my lap.

As excited, on the same page, and ready to work as we all were, I had a hard time working in a group of three. The approach I wanted to take was different than the one that Isabel and Emma wanted in terms of coordinating, meeting, and brainstorming. All of this was brought into sharp relief when the fall semester rolled around and we all lived together. In Emma and Isabel's eyes, living together meant a convenience. For me, it resulted in an obsessive fear of laziness. Our senior project meetings became

spontaneous, in the middle of dinner or in the living room. While I have no problem discussing Greek mythology over dinner, in fact I rather enjoy it, I began to notice the trend of Isabel and Emma having Senior Project talks without me. These were not scheduled, formal meetings, so they probably didn't even realize that I felt left out. But I did. Every time I noticed this, I asked if we could schedule meetings so we had a planned out time to work on the project together, but this proposal was not received particularly well. The end result was that I would get home from a long day to find that decisions had been made without me or I would go to sleep and hear decisions start to be made through my bedroom wall. I didn't know how to navigate that. I like to be organized in the process of making theater. I like meetings, structure, and plans. I am afraid of messiness when it comes to the structural elements of theater because I have watched projects crash and burn for lack of structure. Lack of coordination between people has landed in me in really horrible, border-line abusive situations working on theater projects before, and I was scared. I love my Emma and Isabel dearly and did not want this project to ruin our friendship. My own structural preferences aside, Emma and Isabel were wonderful Senior Project partners. Their wit, intelligence, and vision shone through very strongly in the finished product and throughout the entire process. We made an opinionated, powerhouse trio, which was exactly what this story needed. Uncertain voices would not have accomplished the job. Isabel's script is clever and beautiful, highlighting the injustices and bringing humor to the dark sections of the play. Emma's direction was powerful and intelligent, and her stage pictures are simply unbeatable. I am proud to have worked alongside them and created *MAIDS* together.

The Story

The first step we took after choosing our source material was to read through the book and select which passages, sections, images stood out to us as the most meaningful or that we particularly wanted to incorporate. We each did this individually and compiled out passages so we could see where our hopes and interests aligned. We created a document, full of the parts of the story and quotations we were the most excited about. Most of these passages centered on the maids and Penelope, which helped us develop this particular story. Looking back at the document, we didn't end up using much of our original material. We planned to use songs. We were going to make our cast learn double-dutch! The original script that Isabel produced was a compilation of little parts, quotations, and songs from Margaret Atwood's text, attached by Isabel's original work. The revision that followed meant entirely re-writing the script, following the same outline and structure we had created, but using modern, colloquial language and not feeling bound to Atwood's words. This version became the final version that was staged in the LUMA Theater in February.

Upon reading the draft of our script, one of the first questions that our adviser, Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas, posed to us was "why a cast of all women?" He was particularly concerned about the way we double cast half of our actors to have women playing men onstage rather than casting six men. The three of us sat there, unsure of how to answer. All of us shared the instinct to cast all women and, when male characters appeared, have the women of our cast play them. We hadn't even questioned it – we just knew it *had* to be women. None of us had a clear way of articulating this instinct and desire in that moment, but it has since become crystal clear to all of us. *MAIDS* is about the erasure of women. It is about women who don't have a voice, about women whose voices are taken

away by men. That story needs to be told by women. Some of the main themes that appear throughout *The Penelopiad* and *MAIDS* involve violence against women and lack of agency: themes that, in my opinion, should be addressed BY women.

Launching into the analysis of the production and design, I feel it is important for the reader to know The Story. I encourage you to pause now and read the script attached in the Appendix.² For anyone who does not wish to pause and read the script, I will briefly summarize the plot of *MAIDS*. Our story opened in the Asphodel (the underworld) where the maids prepared to tell us, the audience, The Story. We learn that they are dead and have been for a very long time. Scene 2 is the start of the reenactment of The Story where we meet Penelope and receive a lot of exposition. Odysseus is away, Penelope is waiting for him, and there are a bunch of suitors who want to marry her in his absence. Penelope gives her maids the “task” of keeping the suitors busy, happy, and satisfied.³ In Scene 3, we meet the suitors. They are crude, greedy, and menacing. The maids, on Penelope’s orders, have sex with them. It is awful to watch and painful for the maids to reenact. In Scene 4, Penelope wakes the maids, and then we learn that Odysseus has returned. The suitors panic and run. Odysseus enters in Scene 5, covered in the suitors’ blood. He hangs the maids. Scene 6 is back in the underworld. Everyone has been dead for hundreds of years. Time has not healed the injustice of being killed and forgotten. The maids confront Penelope. Who knows how many times this confrontation has happened. It doesn’t really accomplish anything. The maids’ stories are still unsung. They remain the forgotten women. Maybe a few more people in our audience now know that they existed, but that’s about it. This was the story we told.

² The original script, by Isabel Bennett, can be found in the Appendix

³ Penelope is really ordering her maids to sleep with the suitors

The Design Part 1: Research / Concept / The World

One of the biggest obstacles I faced during this project is the fact that I have had no formal training in design. I took one set design workshop led by Laura Jellinek in December 2016⁴, but that was the extent of my “training” outside of my self-taught practices. Over the past four years, I essentially invented my own process, learning bits and pieces of how it aligned with, or strayed from, professional designers’ processes as I went. I knew in May 2016 that I wanted to start my research process through images, so I did. I compiled images of paintings, scenes, anything that had the right light or texture or color scheme. I filled my google drive with ice burgs and ballerinas, light bulbs and water, rope and drawings. I had so much research that I was overwhelmed and had to make a new folder into which I put only the things that might be useful. I needed to narrow and focus my research rather than grab onto anything that might be remotely relevant.

One big initial design concept that I had came from the text of *The Penelopiad* rather than from my image research: water. Atwood writes a speech delivered to Penelope by her mother, which stood out to me immediately as something that percolates through the entire book and would be important to our project.

“Water does not resist. Water flows. When you plunge your hand into it, all you feel is a caress. Water is not a solid wall, it will not stop you. But water always goes where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it. Water is patient. Dripping water wears away a stone. Remember that, my child. Remember you are half water. If you can’t go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does.”⁵

Penelope’s mother uses water as a metaphor to instruct her daughter how to behave as a woman. Wait patiently, be lenient and flexible, bend to the will of men, but when you

⁴ My design process began in May 2016, 7 months before this workshop

⁵ Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, 43

need to, use your status to win. Water was at the front of my mind, and fit in well with the ideas of the underworld that the three of us had discussed. It started as a very literal idea; I wanted to have a water effect on the floor in the first and last scenes, ebbing in and out during the rest of the show. This concept changed throughout the process and was ultimately cut, though the idea behind it remained. With the hanging elements I used, specifically the sail, water below was implied and I no longer felt it was necessary to replicate it on the floor. Even though my concept changed, water influenced my process and helped me land at the final design. The world remained defined by water, even though it never explicitly appeared onstage.

The leading concept behind the project is the erasure of women. The way I translated this into design came out of extensive research based on the idea of erasure, forgetting, untold stories, myth, and unknown history. *MAIDS* tells a classical story in a new way, shedding light on the forgotten women of the epic, heroic tale of Odysseus. The story is old. The story is decaying, being forgotten, and being rethought. When we started the project, I had never read the *Odyssey*, so even my knowledge of it came from retellings, Rick Riordan⁶, movies, etc. This is a story that many people know but have never read. So what does it mean to be presenting a frequently untold section of an incredibly famous and well-known story? What expectations would our audience have the moment they heard the name Odysseus? We knew that the name Odysseus was the one people would recognize immediately. We did not want to tell Odysseus' story again, nor did we want the play to revolve around him. Unfortunately, his story is an essential part of the story and, for it to make sense when he returns and slaughters the suitors and

⁶ Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series heavily influenced by knowledge of and understanding of stories from the *Odyssey* when I read them as a child.
Riordan, Rick. *The Lightning Thief*. New York: Miramax Books / Hyperion Books for Children, 2005. Print

maids, his presence throughout the rest of the story needs to be acknowledged. As frustrating it as it is to admit, the story would not exist without Odysseus. He is the one they are all waiting for. He is the one the suitors want to replace. He is the one Penelope and her maids must answer to. His presence is inescapable, years before he returns from Troy. His presence (or remarkable absence) is part of the world of the play.

MAIDS takes place in the underworld, where everyone in the story has been dead for hundreds of years. This is the place that Margaret Atwood calls the Asphodel. The name comes from Greek mythology, where the fields of asphodel are essentially the section of the underworld where average souls go when they die. It is neither heaven nor hell. It's for the normal, unremarkable people, neither good nor evil. Homer has been cited as the original source to describe the meadows of the underworld as being covered in Asphodel, a small white flower.

The final book of *The Odyssey*, "Peace," begins with Hermes leading the suitors' ghosts away to the underworld.

"Hermes the Healer led them on, and down the dank moldering paths and past the Ocean's streams they went and past the White Rock and the Sun's Western Gates and past the Land of Dreams, and they soon reached the fields of asphodel where the dead, the burnt-out wraiths or mortals, make their home."⁷

It was when I read this section that I had the rather horrible realization that yes, the maids are dead and forgotten and stuck in the asphodel together forever. The suitors are there too. The men who tormented Penelope and raped the maids haunt the same section of the underworld. There is literally no escape for these women, ever. Here the juxtaposition is created. The underworld described in *The Odyssey* and in *The Penelopiad* is dark, yes, but it is also full of... life? It is certainly full of dead souls and also lots of flowers.

⁷ Homer, *The Odyssey*, 468-469

Atwood writes, “*The fields of asphodel* has a poetic lilt to it. But just consider. Asphodel, asphodel, asphodel – pretty enough white flowers, but a person gets tired of them after a while.”⁸ There is something beautiful but also wildly monotonous and boring about the fields of asphodel.

The Design Part 2: The Set

I have always been highly interested in the relationship between set and light design. My favorite pieces of design work involve the ability to really connect the two and have them interact. That is part of what I hoped to accomplish with the design of *MAIDS*. The mechanism that ultimately accomplished this in my final design was a series of hanging light bulbs that floated above the stage. The image that sparked the idea of hanging light bulbs I found, of all places, on Pinterest. My initial image research was just by collecting images, but once collected, I pursued the sources and meaning behind each photo. When I clicked the link of this hanging light image, it led me to Yanko Design’s website, where an article featured work done by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, a New York based architecture firm. The series depicted, *Light Sock*, evoked some other worldly, larval universe that somehow aligned with the Asphodel. I latched onto this image immediately. The almost alien nature of the lights felt otherworldly and ethereal, haunting and beautiful simultaneously. The image felt lonely and forgotten, like the lights were just left in a warehouse until somebody happened to come by and take a photo. This was what I was looking for in my research phase. This was the feeling I wanted to evoke when I found the image in October (though this feeling morphed and developed throughout the process). Hanging lights became part of the way I saw the world of this play, full of mystery and a cold, dead beauty.

⁸ Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, 15



Diller Scofidio + Renfro, *Light “Sock” It*⁹

I mentioned the idea of putting hanging lights onstage to Emma and Isabel multiple times, and was all set to proceed. During one production meeting, I began talking to Hellena about the hanging lights, and Emma started to demonstrate her doubts about the concept. She expressed the concern that the stage would be cluttered and messy and, since the image I showed her was from my research, she thought I wanted to replicate it rather than create something with a similar feeling. We talked for a while about the hanging lights, and she ultimately agreed to them, but still sounded relatively unenthusiastic. Lucky for me, over winter break she saw *The Great Comet of 1812* on Broadway and changed her mind¹⁰.

My original plan was to create a casing like the one in the image, but made out of ship netting, like the netting that ultimately hung with the sail. As it turns out, this idea posed a fire hazard and I was asked to reconsider the casing. I ended up having a series of hanging light bulbs, all of different sizes and shapes, hanging above the stage. Selecting each individual bulb was a joy; the care that I was allowed to put into such a small detail

⁹ Yanko Design, *Light “Sock” It*

¹⁰ The set of *The Great Comet of 1812* features hanging light bulbs, which scattered out over the stage and through the audience, creating a celestial and elegant effect.

as which light bulb to hang where was thrilling. I went home and started sketching the two line sets, as much to scale as I could draft by hand. I worked and re-worked the placement of each bulb, varying and comparing height, size, and proximity to other bulbs. When I was finally happy with the draft, I sent it to Josh Foreman to hang. And then I waited, knowing that there was nothing more I could do for my precious light bulbs until tech.

I wanted the set to, in some ways, bridge the gap between the Asphodel and the re-enactment. The entire play takes place in the underworld, but the re-enactment should have a distinct feeling of being more alive and taking place in Odysseus' palace. The hanging lights were, for me, a way to tie the two worlds together. My original idea behind the bulbs was that in the underworld, they were sad, beautiful, floating lights. Maybe they were souls of other slaughtered and forgotten women. Maybe they were distant stars. They were meant to be mysterious and sad, but easy to mistake for just something pretty. In my initial concept, during the retelling of the story, the bulbs brightened into something that felt like a chandelier. Once the lights were in the air, however, it was painfully apparent that brightness was not my friend from the bulbs. I use the world painfully quite literally, as my eyeballs discovered the day before tech started when I asked Josh Foreman to show me the bulbs at their full intensity. I believe my exact reaction was "AHHHH ow ok you can take them out." The light bulbs did end up playing an important role throughout the piece, appearing more brightly at specific moments and fading at others. They were an omnipresent entity onstage.

The other important, omnipresent set piece was the tattered sail. The imagery of a sail with the myth of Odysseus is pretty evident, but still merits explanation. My thought process was essentially that I wanted the set to be evocative of The Story that everybody

knows of Odysseus and his epic journey. The set, for me, is highly linked to Odysseus in that it shares some important traits. The set is present through the entire show, impacts what happens onstage, and is part of what the audience takes away from the show, even though the show isn't about the set. Physically, it has a larger presence than any of the actors. This particular set hangs in the air, looming over the action in every scene. Sound like a particular epic hero who is talked about too much and is always present in this play even when he's still on a boat en route to Ithaca?



Photo from Emma Webster's iPhone

One of the main images I collected that inspired the sail was that of a design by Xochitl Gonzalez Quintanilla, a Mexican lighting and set designer who has studied and travelled all over the world. This image came from *Ex-Stasis*, with a plastic sheet made from recycled packing material. The image made me think of a scene from *Pirates of the Caribbean*, where a dead body falls onto a sail in the ocean after some epic battle or other. Essentially, it evoked water, sadness, isolation, drowning, solitude, and beautiful death. This is not to say that I want to romanticize the slaughter of innocent women at the whim of a man, but the image spoke to my design concept in a clear, strong, and undeniable way. It *felt* like the play. I wish I had a more eloquent, descriptive, or

intellectual way of describing this, but it really boiled down to the gut feeling I had looking at this image next to the emotional content and depth I had been learning about *MAIDS* for the past months.



Xochitl Gonzales Quintanilla, *Ex-Stasis*¹¹

This image, along with the research I had been working on, led me to leap with joy when Hellena and Rick said that they had tattered sail in the warehouse that I could use, for free, and drape however I wanted. It was perfect, it was cheap, and it was easy. I know that does not happen in the ‘real world,’ but I am incredibly grateful that it worked so beautifully for this project. The Fisher Center Production Team gave me truly invaluable gifts throughout this process that I could not have obtained elsewhere, including their time, energy, resourcefulness, and immense supply of patience as I got overly excited about all of the capabilities of the LUMA Theater.

¹¹ Gonzales, Xochitl Quintanilla

The Design Part 3: The Lighting

Lighting design is the type of design that I am the most passionate about and the most experienced in. I catered a lot of the set design to my interest in lighting, which was quite apparent with the hanging bulbs and use of fabric (which I've always loved lighting). My role as designer was slightly more confusing when it came to lighting since David Szlasa was hired as the official lighting designer for the festival. In our initial meetings, I told David about the concept of water, described the effect I hoped to put on the floor, and the cold, ethereal tone of the Asphodel. I had done a great deal of research for the lighting and had developed a clear aesthetic that I wanted to convey.¹² I knew what I wanted to appear onstage; the struggle would be working with the festival designer and making sure that my vision was brought across even as he contributed his own artistic skill and vision to the process.

When it came to elements of the lighting plot, I did not have a great deal of control since David was creating a plot to accommodate the entire festival. I did, however, make several specific requests including blue down light, some gobos, specific boom lighting and gels, etc. In an email I sent David, I asked about his basic plot, assuming that he would have a standard warm and cool wash, which he did. My lighting notes came in rehearsal reports and emails, sometimes far too frequently. The Fisher Center Production Team was really wonderful about keeping me in the loop about tech elements, probably more so than with other students who were less adamant about having information. Josh sent me the plot as soon as he had access to it, David agreed to meet with me when he was at Bard early, and everyone did a really wonderful job of keeping me updated as much as possible. I think Hellena in particular could tell that my lack of

¹² This research can be found in Appendix 2: Selected Research

control with the lighting was stressing me out, and she was a super hero when it came to reassurance.



Photos by Rowan Dunphy

I was very concerned with color in my lighting. The varying shades of blue (from the deep, rich, blue down light to the cold, icy light coming from the booms, helped to define the Asphodel and create the world of the maids. I played with shadow as much as possible, particularly whenever men appeared. The suitors' scene and the Odysseus scene used mostly side lighting that would cast shadows over the men's faces at the moments when they were the most menacing. I have learned that lighting can make or break a piece of theater, no matter how good the other design elements are. Poor lighting can ruin a beautiful set. The most beautiful blue costumes can be washed out and turn dull in orange light (as I learned later when board-oping for Faculty Dance). It was essential to me that the lighting come together in the way I envisioned, and it was hard for me to let go and have faith that tech week would bring good things for this play and my artistic vision as the designer.

The Design Part 4: The Soundscape

The soundscape came out of a zócalo¹³ in Spring 2016 where Bruce Oldand came and talked to us about The Tank. Odland told us a story of finding an abandoned tank in the middle of a desert in Colorado and deciding to break in and use it for the creation of art. It has since become a beloved tank where artists come to play music and create truly magical sounds with the beautifully echoing acoustics of the tank. The story was inspiring; I was in love with the idea of making something so beautiful out of a giant piece of abandoned trash. Isabel and I latched on quickly to The Tank and, and we started listening to various sounds on the website (yes, the tank has its own website).¹⁴ A few days later, Isabel mentioned how perfectly some of the songs would fit in the Asphodel. She was right. The music was ethereal and haunting, beautiful and sad. It felt perfect to set the Asphodel, particularly since we had already talked about having an Asphodel theme playing. Upon learning that we were first in the festival and therefore had preshow time while the audience entered the space, the Asphodel theme felt even more perfect to have playing at a very low volume when the audience arrived. Our hope with this was that the audience might notice the soundscape, but they wouldn't be thinking about it or be so aware of it that they didn't focus on conversation, finding their seats, or your average theater-goer business. We also utilized The Tank when it came to the suitors' and maids' deaths, incorporating a screeching track that culminated in the "death boom" where the suitors' splash of blood appeared and where the maids dropped to the floor, dead, with nooses around their necks. The Tank became part of the world of the play.

¹³ Zócalo is a biweekly gathering of theater & performance students and faculty either to present work or to hear guest artists speak.

¹⁴ tanksounds.org

The Design Part 5: The Costumes

The costume design was a pretty unanimous concept. We all had a pretty similar idea of what we wanted out of the costumes. Timelessness was the hardest part to achieve. We all agreed on a pretty similar utilitarian, basic, long sleeved button up dress. A moment of horror arose during the fittings, when we tried on the first of the maids' dresses and it looked like it was made of paper and straight out of a really bad movie about mental institutions. It was starchy and ugly and would reflect light horribly. Fortunately, the costume shop crew worked their magic and, after some alterations and dyeing the dresses, they looked like costumes that we could put on the LUMA stage without crying. Even offstage, they still looked alarmingly green and like scrubs, but the stage lighting toned down the green and made them look much less medical and institutional. We knew Penelope had to be different and special, preferably with a visible class difference, but we were not entirely clear on the concept for her costume. We talked about red and ordered several possibilities for Isabel to try on (none of which worked). Penelope's skirt that we ended up using was a surprise discovery at the costume warehouse, which worked beautifully. The red velvet was a clear indication of power and class, but the simple top we had her wear kept her from too much extravagance. I believe it is impossible to look at red velvet without instantly thinking of royalty or celebrities, which works for Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, THE Odysseus, Monster-Slayer-Odysseus. We had our costumes, we had our set, we had the soundscape, we had rehearsed for months, it was time to move forward into LUMA itself.

Tech

The week leading up to tech came as an enormous relief. The set was finally in the air. I could look at the actual result and it looked good. I suddenly felt like all the work I had been doing was visible and that nobody would question whether I had been pulling my weight in this project. Hellena and Rick gave me time to give notes on the hanging of the sail so it could be tailored to exactly how I wanted it, and Rick took my notes beautifully. I felt ready, excited, and calmer than I have ever felt going into a tech week. I am used to doing tech weeks in the Old Gym where not only do I have my artistic vision as the designer, but am also the sole source of manpower to execute my plans. Having someone else do the manual labor so I could focus 100% of my time and energy on my own job was an immense weight off my shoulders. This tech would be a piece of cake.

I was half right... but also wrong in several ways. Tech was tricky. Usually, this is where I thrive as a lighting designer. The world comes to life and the hours of prep work come to fruition. Tech is where the magic happens and I feel the most agency over the production. For the Theater and Performance Senior Project Festival, however, the situation was somewhat different. Since *MAIDS* was the only project with a student as the designer, there was a designer for the entire festival. I knew this from day one and had communicated my ideas, concepts, and specific requests to David. I realized when I walked into tech that nobody had talked with David about how tech might be different with our piece given that I had every intention of cueing my own piece. As soon as I saw him sitting at the tech table, I inwardly kicked myself for not talking to him about the actual process of tech. I wished I had asked him if I could be on headset and tell the board op exactly what I wanted. Since I hadn't had that conversation with him prior to tech, I

decided it would create unnecessary tension if I brought it up right as we were about to start. It was very clear to me that both of us considered ourselves the designer for the piece. I narrated what I wanted, which he then conveyed to the board op, mostly producing the result I wanted. There were moments throughout the piece where I told him exactly what I wanted and he, as a designer would, took artistic liberties with it. I had to push harder than I normally do to get my way with the lights. The Odysseus scene in particular was a point of differing opinion between the two of us. I really wanted the cold look that we ended up with, but when I asked David to bring in the splash of red when the suitors were slaughtered offstage, he decided he liked the red so much he kept it for the Odysseus scene. It took four attempts before I got him to change it back to what I wanted. All this probably would have been easily avoided if I had just had a frank discussion with him before tech started and asked if I could act as the only lighting designer for my piece, maybe with him giving suggestions or advice, but really with me behind the wheel. Another lesson learned in the importance of communication. I am happy with the result of our cueing sessions, but it took a great deal of coaxing, requesting, and attempted manipulation on my end, which is never a good tactic going into a high stress environment such as tech.

The final product looked good, the actors did a good job, and the audience liked it. In the most basic sense of a “successful” piece, we succeeded. More than that, I was beyond proud and my fears of not feeling ownership over the piece were vanquished. I helped make this beautiful thing happen, and I could see my own work throughout the entire piece. It was really *our* piece and each of us shone in different ways. I have never felt so strongly that I earned a piece of cake as I did post-show on opening night. It was delicious.

The End... (?)

I know this is not The End, but it is the end of a project that took up a large section of my time, energy, care, and final year of college. *MAIDS* explores and tells a story that will always be relevant and will never be unimportant. The erasure of women is vital to talk about and to see represented onstage. We created something political, accessible, understandable (even to Grandmothers who are afraid it will be “too Avant-Garde” to follow¹⁵), and entertaining. Even if nobody beyond the walls of the LUMA Theater remembers Homer’s forgotten maids, maybe a few members of our audience will. Maybe they will tell a friend. And maybe that friend will re-read the *Odyssey*, see how the women are portrayed, and realize that they’re mistreating their female co-worker. Maybe that is entirely naïve and full of false hope. Maybe it doesn’t matter.

In my experience as a female artist, I am constantly overlooked, undermined, taken advantage of, and pushed to the margins, even within a “safe” college setting. And I am sure the real world will be worse. Working on *MAIDS* gave me a shiny set of battle armor and reminded me of the weapons I already possess. In a very selfish way, this project was good for me (as a culmination of my theater work at Bard should be). In the wider scheme, I know that *MAIDS* brought a community of women together. Our cast bonded more than I could have imagined and became a real community making theater together. Everyone in the rehearsal room had the opportunity to work in a non-male-dominated space. As simple as that seems, it is an experience that I have found very rare in the Bard theater world. In the slightly wider view, *MAIDS* showed the rarely shown to the audience, and hopefully made them think. Theater is the perfect place to open

¹⁵ This was the fear that my beloved Grandmother, Janet Larsen, told me about

dialogue about political issues, and I hope that we, to some degree, accomplished this with *MAIDS*.

I learned a lot from this process, all of which matters a great deal. If I had to pick the one nugget of knowledge that I have taken away from this project, and my four years in the Theater & Performance Program at Bard, it is the following: If I want something to happen, I have to make it happen. Not only that, but I am capable of making the *impossible* happen.¹⁶ This year and this project are evidence, and I am proud.

Afterword:

Watch out, Cleveland, here I come.

¹⁶ I was told by multiple students that I would never design on the LUMA stage. Now I have twice. So there.

Appendix 1: Selected Production Photos



Photo from Emma Webster's iPhone



Photo by Rowan Dunphy



Photo from Emma Webster's iPhone



Photo by Rowan Dunphy



Photo by Rowan Dunphy



Photo by Rowan Dunphy



Photo by Rowan Dunphy



Photo from Emma Webster's iPhone

Appendix 2: Selected Research¹⁷



Gerzso, Gunther. *Underworld*, 1944
(source: Artstor)

This image was part of my Asphodel/Underworld research. The colors, tone, subject matter, and style all informed what I hoped to create in the Asphodel. I also learned that Gerzso, prior to painting this particular work, worked at the Cleveland Playhouse as a set designer! What a small world. I have realized that many of the images I've latched onto with zero knowledge of the background turn out to be created by designers (set, lights, and architecture).



Bocci lighting:
<http://www.mohd.it/catalogo/illuminazione/lampadari/bocci-14-1>

This image inspired the hanging light bulbs. The inspired the celestial feeling of the lights, and the simultaneously infinite yet incredibly finite and confined atmosphere I sought to create. Something about the angle of this photo with lights appearing to fall down above the viewer also speaks to me.

¹⁷ VERY selected – I have chosen to present only the most important pieces of research to me, but there were many many more.



Image from the New Theater of Cardiff's website:

<http://www.newtheatrecardiff.co.uk/about-the-new-theatre/history/>

This image spoke to the idea of forgotten women, along with fitting the general aesthetic I was pursuing. I was mostly intrigued by the girl in the photo, the way she looks almost like an object, the apparent age of the image, and the traditionally beautiful and delicate and "feminine" image that she portrays.



This image is from a cave tours website:

<https://www.epiciceland.is/tours-in-iceland/east-coast/ice-caving/crystal-ice-cave-tour/>

The colors, particularly the cold icy blue next to the warmer sandy floor, spoke to me and informed my lighting choices. The very idea of an ice cave also stood out to me when thinking about the Asphodel.



Book of Hours (Trés Riches Heures du Duc de Berry), fol. 108r, 1414-16
(Source: Artstor)

This image also used that beautiful color palate of the warm with the cold blue, and is an image of Hell. This scene is not what we wanted to create, but it's important to note that my research was not just "pretty" images. I explored a lot of underworlds in the process of defining our Asphodel.

Appendix 3: The Script of MAIDS

MAIDS

a play by

Isabel Bennett

inspired by “The Penelopiad” by Margaret Atwood

Characters:

PENELOPE / ODYSSEUS

MINERVA

ISIDORA

EVANIA

HELENA

ALESSANDRA

LUCIA

MELANTHE / MORIS

LYSANDRA / AMBROSIO

ALTHEA / KYROS

ANDRINA / IGNATIOS

DELIA / ARSENIO

SOPHIA / ANTINOUS

Setting:

The Underworld.

Scene 1.

[*“Asphodel Theme” plays.*]

SOPHIA

Hello! Welcome to the Underworld.

ALTHEA

Hi! It sucks! I don’t know if you know this, but being dead is boring.

LYSANDRA

Murdered.

ALTHEA

Ok yeah. We were murdered. Whatever.

EVANIA

And now we’re stuck down here forever. Literally for-e-ver.

MELANTHE

Wanna know how we got here?

SOPHIA

We’ll tell you. Are you ready? Does everyone have their lines?

ISIDORA

I’ll go get Penelope.

DELIA

Noooooo. Do we have to? I don’t wanna.

HELENA

Oh, come on. Get onstage.

DELIA

I’m tired. And this is boring. We’ve done it like SO many times.

MINERVA

Yeah but we’ve got an audience now. Come on, this is embarrassing.

DELIA

Fiiiiiiiiine.

SOPHIA

Our scene is Ithaca, a palace. The time is...unimportant.

[*Delia reluctantly comes onstage. Light Shift. There are three groups onstage. Lights come up on the first group.*]

Scene 2.

LYSANDRA

Don't worry, you'll settle in fast, just a few things to remember.

ANDRINA

Odysseus has been gone for years, so his wife Penelope runs the place

MELANTHE

By herself?

SOPHIA

She has us. Ladies don't clean. But she's alright for a lady.

LYSANDRA

Very touchy about her husband.

SOPHIA

So don't mention how he might be dead, or unfaithful, or whatever you've heard. Just don't mention Odysseus at all.

ANDRINA

And don't be surprised if she starts crying.

LYSANDRA

She's a downer.

ANDRINA

We have to keep the house ready in case he comes home. Cellars fully stocked, beds made, etc.

MELANTHE

Got it.

LYSANDRA

Oh and one more thing, since Odysseus is gone we've been getting some visitors.

SOPHIA

A bunch of young lords have been hanging around, trying to get in Penelope's pants. They wanna get their hands on her money.

MELANTHE

But she's still married?

ANDRINA

They're assuming Odysseus is dead, they're probably right.

MELANTHE

What're they like? Are they...nice?

SOPHIA

Nice! *[laughs]* That's cute.

MELANTHE

Sorry I didn't...I mean...How do I...Do we talk to them?

LYSANDRA

Not unless you're told. Take orders from Penelope. Not them.

SOPHIA

They're persistent little fuckers. Like cockroaches.

ANDRINA

And they drink too much.

SOPHIA

But you'll get the hang of it. Stick with us.

[lights dim and come up on the next group of three Maids. The first four maids exit.]

HELENA

Did you hear about the cyclops?

ALTHEA

Yes! I heard he stabbed it in the eye!

LUCIA

And the sea monsters? They say he survived two of them. Odysseus is one lucky bastard.

HELENA

I dunno... The war ended ages ago and he still isn't home. And *two* sea monsters? Seems kinda excessive.

ALTHEA

I guess. It's probably all bullshit anyway.

HELENA

Penelope buys it.

ALTHEA

The last messenger said Odysseus had sex with Calypso. I thought Penelope would stab him.

LUCIA

I can't believe she's still waiting for him.

HELENA

Ugh. We *always* talk about Odysseus. Isn't there any other news?

ALTHEA

He's all anyone else wants to talk about. It does get old.

LUCIA

Very. *[pause]* Oh wait just one more though. Trust me this one's actually funny. Did you hear about the pigs?!

HELENA

Pigs?

LUCIA

Apparently his ship stopped on some island and they got kidnapped by a sorceress who turned them all into pigs!

ALTHEA

Where'd you hear that?

LUCIA

I don't know. Around.

ALTHEA

I hope that's true. What fucking idiots.

[The three maids exit and the lights shift again to Penelope and the other five maids.]

PENELOPE

Were there any messengers today?

ISIDORA

No, my lady.

PENELOPE

Still no news?

EVANIA

Nothing, my lady.

MINERVA

I'm sure he's alive. He's a good fighter.

ALESSANDRA

Probably on his way home right now.

PENELOPE

The war's over! They won! What's taking so long? Perhaps the / rumors...

ISIDORA

[quickly]
/ Don't listen to gossip.

EVANIA

I'm sure he's not really fighting monsters.

MINERVA

Or seducing goddesses like everyone says.

ISIDORA

He would never be unfaithful.

PENELOPE

Hmmm...after ten years I have my doubts.

ALESSANDRA

Let's think about something else.

ISIDORA

Take your mind off your husband and focus on the present.

PENELOPE

[pause]
Yes, the present. Are my suitors here?

EVANIA

Yes, my lady.

PENELOPE

You'd think they would have found something better to do by now.

MINERVA

They say they won't leave unless you marry one of them.

DELIA

[under her breath]
Or fuck one of them.

PENELOPE

I can't avoid them forever, but the longer I can fend them off the better. *[pause]* I've got a task for you. All of you.

ISIDORA

Yes, my lady?

PENELOPE

I need you to buy us some time. If I keep them waiting around I'm afraid they might get violent.

MINERVA

They're probably harmless.

PENELOPE

I won't risk it. You must keep them busy and keep an eye on them for me. Make sure they're happy.

DELIA

Happy?

PENELOPE

You know, satisfied.

[The Maids give her blank looks]

You have certain...talents that will please them.

[she gestures vaguely at their bodies. The Maids hesitate.]

You're the only people I trust.

ISIDORA

Yes, my lady.

PENELOPE

All right. Time to meet my fans.

[Penelope and Maids exit.]

Scene 3.

[Enter Suitors.]

IGNATIOS

Alright let's make a bet. First one to get some will win / ...

AMBROSIO

/ I'll put money on my chances with Penelope!

IGNATIOS

One hundred says I'm first in her bed.

MORIS

It doesn't matter who she sleeps with idiot! It's who she *marries*.

ANTINOUS

Fuck her all you want, then *I'll* marry her and be richer than all you twatwaffles.

KYROS

Two hundred says I beat you to it!

ANTINOUS

You're on, asshole.

[Enter Penelope and Maids]

PENELOPE

Gentlemen. I see you've made yourselves at home.

ARSENIO

Penelope! My lady, the verse of great Apollo himself is unworthy to sing your beauty. There is more radiance in one of your eyes than...than in...um..

[suitors laugh at him and push him aside]

AMBROSIO

Nice try moron.

PENELOPE

I'm flattered.

MORIS

My lady, we were just saying how worried we are. And anxious for your safety with Odysseus away.

PENELOPE

Anxious, huh?

ARSENIO

So terrible that he left you alone, with no one to defend you and your fortune.

ANTINOUS

With no one to keep you warm.

PENELOPE

I'm surviving, thank you. My husband will be home soon.

KYROS

I doubt it.

IGNATIOS

What are the odds?

ARSENIO

He's drowned for sure.

ANTINOUS

Or starved to death.

MORIS

Or beheaded by Trojans!

ARSENIO

Tossed on Poseidon's boiling sea, surely no mortal could withstand the monstrous trials of the divine....

AMBROSIO

Shut up!

PENELOPE

I hear news. Stories. He's not / ...

ANTINOUS

/ Why would he come back?

KYROS

If he's stupid enough to leave his wife and home then he's too dumb to steer a ship.

ISIDORA

[whispers to Penelope]

You see, my lady? They're idiots.

AMBROSIO

Silence! We're talking.

ANTINOUS

Bring us wine and something to eat! We've come with large appetites.

[Laughter. The Maids hesitate and look to Penelope who signals them to do as they're told. Maids exit.]

AMBROSIO

Penelope, Odysseus is gone. We know it, and you know it.

ARSENIO

You wanna live without a husband?

PENELOPE

Would you be his replacement?

ARSENIO

Of course! You have a lovely home. It should be filled with children.

IGNATIOS

Don't your sheets feel cold? Your bed must be so large and empty.

PENELOPE

I'm old enough to be your mother.

ANTINOUS

[*aside*]

I bet she could still squeeze out one or two little brats.

PENELOPE

Finally, an honest opinion.

ANTINOUS

You want honest? Alright. No more sweet talk "my lady."

KYROS

We're not leaving. Not until one of us is your husband. We've got a bet going and someone has to win.

MORIS

Do you think we'd come all this way to go home empty-handed?

PENELOPE

I was hoping you would.

ARSENIO

Well, that's not very hospitable. You have so much to offer. And if you refuse to give, we will take it.

ANTINOUS

We're losing our patience, Penelope. We won't be this nice for long.

[*Maids enter with food, wine, tablecloth. The Suitors fall upon the food.*]

IGNATIOS

Finally! Let me at it. I'm starved.

MORIS

Pass the wine.

AMBROSIO

Get it yourself dickhead.

[The Suitors become frenzied over the food and drink. The Maids stand back with Penelope and survey. Penelope whispers into their ears and sneaks away.]

EVANIA

Hey hotstuff!

ARSENIO

You still here? We need more.

[waving the wine bottle at her]

EVANIA

Don't worry we have plenty.

ARSENIO

[with mouthful]

Where's Penelope? I was just getting somewhere.

AMBROSIO

Liar! She barely looked at you.

ARSENIO

Not true!

AMBROSIO

No one wants to look at your nasty face.

KYROS

A face not even a mother could love.

ANTINOUS

Shut up, you son-of-a-bitch!

LUCIA

Drinking makes Penelope tired, she needs to sleep.

ISIDORA

Give her time to grieve her husband. Then she promises she'll marry one of you.

AMBROSIO

Which one?

HELENA

We don't know. You'll have to win her over.

EVANIA

But that can wait. In the meantime we're here to keep you company...if you like..

ISIDORA

I'm sure we could provide entertainment.

ALESSANDRA

If you tell us your plans to steal Penelope. We could advise you, get you on her good side.

[Suitors confer with each other]

ARSENIO

Why not? She's not going anywhere. Let's have fun.

MORIS

Some of them aren't very pretty.

IGNATIOS

Close your eyes! Then they're all the same.

ANTINOUS

If you get an ugly one just imagine she's Helen of Troy. That'll put bronze in your spear!

[Returning to maids.]

ANTINOUS

Well isn't that sweet of you. We'll take your offer.

LUCIA

Wonderful.

MINERVA

We're so glad you accept.

ISIDORA

What an honor.

Scene 4.

[Maids and Suitors come together and end up lying in pairs around the stage. Lights shift and Penelope enters. She goes to one of the Maids and wakes them up. The others slowly wake up and join when they hear talking. Suitors stay asleep.]

PENELOPE

Well? How was it?

LUCIA

[yawning]

Fine, my lady.

PENELOPE

Did you find anything useful? They're getting impatient. Should I be worried?

LUCIA

They're not leaving. But we said you were in mourning, so that should buy you some time.

EVANIA

Do you wanna hear what they say, my lady?

[*Penelope nods*]

ALESSANDRA

They say: "It's been years. Fucking get over it already."

MINERVA

"What a tease. I should just grab the bitch and make off with her."

ISIDORA

And so on.

PENELOPE

Well at least they're distracted for now. Hopefully you can keep them that way till Odysseus comes home.

ISIDORA

We live to serve.

PENELOPE

Yes...I mean...um...thank you.

ALESSANDRA

It was easy enough.

MINERVA

They were wary at first but they came around.

ISIDORA

They think sleeping with us is like stealing from Odysseus himself.

EVANIA

And that got them very enthusiastic.

LUCIA

[*to another Maid*] Imagine how excited they'd be if they actually got Penelope.

HELENA

[laughing]
They'd literally explode!

PENELOPE

Stop that. You'll wake them. Clean this mess up and keep an eye on them. I need to rest.

[Penelope exits. Maids start cleaning.]

HELENA

Oh she needs to rest, does she?

EVANIA

What the hell did she do?

ALESSANDRA

I'd like to lie down. On my own.

[MINERVA and EVANIA exit with the tablecloth, food, etc.]

ISIDORA

Well you know what they say, we'll sleep when we're dead.

[Enter Maids speaking in loud whispers]

MINERVA

Oh my god oh my god oh my god!

ISIDORA

What? What happened?

EVANIA

He's here, he's here! *He* is here.

ALESSANDRA

Wait. You can't mean...

EVANIA

Odysseus!!

HELENA

Shut up! Seriously?!

MINERVA

We just saw him with Penelope. He came in disguised as a beggar probably just to mess with her. You shoulda seen her face!

ISIDORA

Oh shit! *[pause]* Should we warn our friends?

EVANIA

Hell yes.

[The Maids go to the Suitors and gently touch their faces to wake them up.]

MINERVA

Rise and shine, hot stuff.

LUCIA

Did you sleep well?

ARSENIO

[groggy and probably hung over]

Hmmm what? Dammit woman lemme sleep.

ALESSANDRA

I'm afraid we can't do that.

EVANIA

We have a wonderful surprise for you.

ISIDORA

A special guest.

ANTINOUS

What are you talking about? Is it Penelope?

HELENA

No. But someone's here.

MORIS

Who?

MAIDS (ALL)

[Standing up and yelling triumphantly]

Odysseus!

[The Suitors jump up and panic. The Maids howl with laughter as they scramble to exit.]

ANTINOUS

What the fuck?! He's dead! He should be fucking dead!

KYROS

Wasted my time with whores and no prize to show for it.

MORIS

We could challenge him!

AMBROSIO

He's a war hero dumbass. Fight him if you want but you'll die.

ANTINOUS

I'm getting the fuck out of here.

ARSENIO

With nothing?!

ANTINOUS

We'll leave with our lives if we're lucky

IGNATIOS

Outta my way!!!

Scene 5.

[The Suitors scramble over each other as they exit. The Maids stand, unsure of what to do as offstage they hear chaotic noise, sounds of the Suitors' death, then silence. Odysseus enters slowly with blood on him and trailing behind him in his clothes.]

ODYSSEUS

What a homecoming!

I was hoping for a party rather than a slaughter but oh well.

Ladies, I'm afraid I've left a bloody mess out there. Go clean it up, would you.

[The Maids exit with MINERVA the last to leave. Before she can go ODYSSEUS grabs her and pulls her back.]

Not you. You stay with me. I wanna catch up and see what I've missed around here.

Have you been helping my wife while I was gone?

MINERVA

Yes, my lord.

ODYSSEUS

Good good. And what about those dead young men? Were they friends of yours?

MINERVA

Not friends, my lord. They weren't welcome.

ODYSSEUS

Oh but they were. They had quite a welcome so I'm told. You gave them my wine, my beds, you even gave them yourselves.

MINERVA

That was Penelope's orders, we / didn't...

ODYSSEUS

/Don't blame someone else. Take responsibility. You let them in, you slept with them didn't you?

MINERVA

It wasn't.../

ODYSSEUS

/Didn't you!

MINERVA

Yes my lord.

[ODYSSEUS lunges at MINERVA and chokes her. The other eleven MAIDS enter. ODYSSEUS kills the MAIDS. The lights shift and "Asphodel theme" plays again. Enter Maids.]

Scene 6.

MELANTHE

So yeah. That's it. That's how we got here.

LYSANDRA

Penelope's down here too now. But she got a nice death, old age. Lucky.

[Enter Penelope crossing the stage. Trying to avoid the Maids. The Maids share a conspiratorial look and start to follow and surround Penelope. They corner her.]

MELANTHE

Hello.

PENELOPE

What? What do you want?

EVANIA

Oh nothing. Good maids don't want things.

PENELOPE

Look, I did what you wanted. I went along with your little reenactment now just leave me alone!

ISIDORA

We want you to remember exactly what happened. We wanted to set the story straight so there's no confusions later.

PENELOPE

I told you, I was asleep! I passed out when I saw the bodies and all the blood. I was unconscious. I didn't know he would do that, I didn't know, I swear I didn't.

SOPHIA

After all we did for you, you did nothing for us.

MINERVA

You don't seem sorry. You slept with him the night he murdered us.

PENELOPE

Of course I did. He was my husband and I still loved him.

SOPHIA

Oh yes, you loved him.

PENELOPE

He feels remorse, I'm sure of it, but I can't talk to him because he won't stay. He has to keep being reborn just to get away from you haunting him. You're the reason he can't stay with me.

MAIDS (ALL)

You're the reason we're dead!

PENELOPE

We're all dead now! What does it matter?

ALTHEA

We were murdered. *We* were forgotten. But Odysseus is remembered, he's fine.

DELIA

Even your dumb suitors are more famous than we are!

PENELOPE

You want fame?

DELIA

We want to exist! We want to be myths and legends.

HELENA

We want to be hot gossip!

LUCIA

We want to be general knowledge!

ALESSANDRA

We want a fucking encyclopedia page!

PENELOPE

I don't know how to help you.

MAIDS (ALL)

Not good enough!

PENELOPE

Please, leave me alone.

MINERVA

Why did *we* die? We were just discarded. You didn't even bury us.

ISIDORA

After what you made us do you owe us at least that.

PENELOPE

I couldn't.

ISIDORA

Why not?

PENELOPE

I...I don't know.

ALESSANDRA

Not good enough.

PENELOPE

I was afraid...

LUCIA

Not good enough.

PENELOPE

I didn't want to look at the bodies.

HELENA

Not good enough.

PENELOPE

Your bodies.

MINERVA

Not good enough.

PENELOPE

He would've stopped me.

MAID(S)

Not good enough.

SOPHIA

WHAT?!

PENELOPE
I just couldn't.

SOPHIA
That doesn't matter.

EVANIA
He doesn't matter.

MELANTHE
This isn't about him.

ALTHEA
Everything is always about him!

DELIA
We were MURDERED.

SOPHIA
And you got to live.

ISIDORA
We just want to know why.

ANDRINA
We want people to ask why.

PENELOPE
What for?

LYSANDRA
Because we were real. And now we're not.

DELIA
We didn't slay monsters. We didn't topple cities.

MINERVA
But we existed. What else could we do?

PENELOPE
I... [*She stutters. The maids lose their patience, dismiss her, and exit. She turns, confused and abandoned.*]I don't know.

End of Play

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